



# An Artist against the Third Reich

Ernst Barlach, 1933–1938

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# Introduction

**E**rnst Barlach's art, and the difficulties it caused him after January 1933, are mere details in the history of National Socialist Germany. In the history of twentieth-century art, on the contrary, his sculptures of 1933 and later, among them some of his most powerful figures, occupy an assured place. His literary work – he published his first play in 1912 – had slowed somewhat by the time Hitler gained power; a novel, *The Stolen Moon*, remained unfinished. But in essays and in his extensive correspondence with artists and others who sought him out as the dictatorship took hold, his reflections on art and its place in a degraded society rose to new levels of expressiveness. In Barlach's life, finally, his years in the Third Reich, which were also his last years, were discordant and tragic.

That Barlach's work became an issue for the cultural leadership of the Reich lent it a measure, however circumscribed, of political significance. To the regime's claim of control over the arts, Barlach responded by asserting, in statements and through his work, his

freedom to sculpt as he chose. His declarations of artistic independence took courage and heartened a few artists and members of the public; but inevitably, their resonance was limited. Barlach's intransigence might trouble officials, his work shown in a gallery or reproduced in a catalogue or book could reveal the hollowness of state-sponsored art and open a chink in the compact front bonding people, party, and Führer; but neither Barlach nor any other artist posed problems that the party and the police could not readily master.

If, nevertheless, National Socialism paid constant and anxious attention to the arts, and endowed them with a symbolic significance that the German people was never allowed to forget, it was for two reasons: the regime's insistence on uniform obedience to stated and even implied policy in public and private life; and the political and personal meaning that the arts possessed for Hitler. It was largely his doing that in the political conflicts leading to the Third Reich, the arts – and none more so than painting and sculpture – were used to identify the political and racial enemies of German resurgence. After Hitler became chancellor, he tried to shape the arts into a defining force of the new Germany. As the Reich head of press affairs, Otto Dietrich, warned a journalist who was planning to write on cultural matters: "Just because of the Führer's interest in the fine arts, the greatest possible caution is indicated in one's formulations."<sup>1</sup> But Hitler also knew that the arts were no more than auxiliaries in the political wars. Artists might persuade or confuse – they were not a power in their own right.

Barlach would have agreed. In a response to right-wing denunciations of his person and his sculpture in the 1920s, he described himself and artists in general only somewhat ironically as a "sliver," shaved off by vast forces of cultural and political change,

“a crumbling bit of nothingness, caught between earthquakes and torrents of lava.”<sup>2</sup> But the same essay, in which he draws this apocalyptic image of disjunction and isolation, also demonstrates the close connection of the artist and his environment. The larger world, which rarely concerns itself with aesthetic matters, was after all sufficiently interested in Barlach’s art to attack it; and he, in turn, responded with considerable energy. Although his work was not intentionally political, it marked some of the major issues in Weimar politics. In particular, his war memorials were drawn into party conflicts over the legacy of the World War. The confrontation of the artist with his critics reveals much about both.

That is also true of Barlach’s relations with the Third Reich: of his rejection of its values and his efforts to work in the face of interference and hostility, and of the attempts of some National Socialists to silence him, while others tried to win him over to their cause. That men at the highest levels of the regime condemned Barlach for betraying his German heritage by creating art that polluted German culture, is typical of the brutality – intellectual no less than physical – that characterized National Socialism. The specific leads back to the general. Barlach’s life and work bear on German history as the country passed from republic to Third Reich and moved toward war and extermination; the impact of National Socialism on Barlach, and his reactions to it, are of consequence to his biography and to the history of modern art.